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Contras plan powerful radio broadcasts into Nicaragua

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MIAMI — U.S.-backed Nicaraguan rebels soon will launch a powerful clandestine radio broadcast to try to fuel public discontent with Nicaragua's ruling Sandinistas and win popular support inside the country.

The 50,000-watt broadcasting station, apparently the world's only AM guerrilla radio channel, would be the Nicaraguan contras' biggest effort yet in the war's political side, which they have largely ignored until now.

"I think the radio is as important as the [insurgent] army," rebel spokesman Leonardo Somarriba said. "It is the tool we can use to get to the people's minds."

Radio Liberacion, as it is named, is expected to be on the air by the first of the year, Somarriba said. The 6 p.m.-to-6 a.m. broadcasts are expected to include anti-Sandinista music, soap operas, editorials and commentary by rebel leaders.

Productions already prepared include mocking characterizations of President Daniel Ortega and Interior Minister Tomas Borge speaking in the countryside, with sound effects of barking dogs, crowing roosters and piano scales for drama.

The polished programs have high-tech lead-ins with beeping radio signals and canned applause. And always the rebels' message: "Radio Liberacion ... the voice of those who have no voice. . . . Thousands of compatriots who form the commandos of liberty in a country oppressed by international communism through

nine traitors of the Sandinista front. . . . Communists — enemies of God and man."

Rebel leaders said their news programs would be "objective, without propaganda and without censorship," in an effort to earn them credibility and a wide audience and to counter the Sandinista-controlled media in Nicaragua.

"We want to be the number-one radio station in Nicaragua," said Frank Arana, a rebel spokesman.

U.S. officials who asked not to be identified said that the rebel radio would be broadcast from nearby El Salvador, where a leftist guerrilla movement is fighting to oust the U.S.-backed government. Contra sources said only that the transmitter "could be anywhere" and would not comment further.

The Salvadoran guerrillas receive assistance for their clandestine Radio Venceremos from Nicaragua. Contra leaders said that they had studied Venceremos as well as the U.S. government's Spanish-language Radio Marti, which is beamed at Cuba.

Radio is the most popular medium in poor countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador, where television is expensive and illiteracy is high. Radio has been used extensively for "psychological operations" in the Salvadoran government's counterinsurgency war.

Contra spokesmen said that funding for the radio station did not come out of the \$100 million in aid that Congress approved for the contras this year. However, the spokesmen

would not identify the source or quantity of the "private donations" that they said were supporting the radio.

U.S. sources say that State Department and Central Intelligence Agency officials have advised the rebels on the radio, but contra spokesmen would not comment on whether they received any assistance. Regional political analysts have said that one of the contras' major problems was their lack of a political program and internal propaganda.

"They should have done this a long time ago," said a U.S. official who asked not to be identified. "They have got to get their message to the population. They have got to articulate what this war is about."

With the radio, the contras hope to

increase the name recognition of their leaders, many of whom are little-known inside Nicaragua. They hope to convince Nicaraguans that they are a nationalistic movement — rather than a U.S. mercenary force, as the Sandinistas portray them in the state-run media — and to show that they are united.

The radio will be run under the name of the United Nicaraguan Opposition, the rebel's umbrella group. The Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest armed group, has had a weaker shortwave radio called 15 de Septiembre, which aired two hours daily but was hard to receive.

Sandinista spokesmen could not be reached for official comment on the radio, but a Defense Ministry official said, "First, let's see if they get it on the air, and then we'll worry about jamming it."